

THE JEWS OF SOUTH AFRICA

Portrait of a Flourishing Community

DAN JACOBSON

THOUGH there have been Jews in South Africa almost since the first days of European settlement of the Cape in the middle of the 17th century, the South African Jewish community of today is the child of the same great wave of emigration from Europe which carried so many Jews to the United States from about 1880 onwards. But unlike the Jewish community in the United States, the South African community is remarkably homogeneous in character—some 80 per cent of its members being immigrants, or the descendants of immigrants, from Lithuania. Why so many Jews from Lithuania, and a smaller number from Latvia, should have been attracted particularly to South Africa—rather than to the United States, say, or the Argentine—seems to have been a matter of chance, the result of the conspicuous success of a few individuals whom numbers of others immediately attempted to emulate. But whatever the reasons that brought them there, it is these Litvaks and their descendants

who have made South African Jewry what it is today, though the influence of those German and English Jews who were in South Africa before this wave of immigration has also had its effect.

And in the opinion of the editors of *The Jews in South Africa: A History*, the South African Jews of today "have inherited some of the qualities of the Litvaks—their warm-heartedness and generosity, their practical-mindedness, a strong feeling of Jewish solidarity, and a love of learning combined with a somewhat critical attitude towards religious tradition." The editors point out that the Zionist movement has had greater support from them than from any other Western Jewish community, and add that being "enterprising and hard-working, they have been able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by [their] new and developing country. . . ." The tone of self-gratulation is unmistakable, but with the evidence of the *History* before one it would have been hard to avoid.

The editors and fourteen others have collaborated to produce a history of the Jews in South Africa from the earliest days of white settlement to 1910, the date of the establishment of the Union; and though from 1880—which is the date of the first major immigration of Jews to the country—to 1910, may seem too short a time in which anything could have happened, by that time the community had in fact set itself firmly on the path which was to bring it to what it is today. Numbering only some 120,000 members, by outside observers it is declared to be the wealthiest Jewish community in the world per capita, and one playing a part in the life of South Africa, and in the Zionist movement, quite out of proportion to its size.

THE first comprehensive history of the South African Jewish community, *The Jews in South Africa*, edited by Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz (Oxford University Press, 422 pp., \$5.60), is here discussed at length by DAN JACOBSON. Familiar to our readers mainly as a writer of fiction, Mr. Jacobson has also contributed several articles and reviews dealing with South African racialism, among them "A White Liberal Trapped by His Prejudices" (May 1953). He was born in Kimberley, South Africa in 1929, educated at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, and spent some months on a kibbutz in Israel, after which he lived in London for several years. Currently he is at Stanford University, preparing his third novel for publication. His most recent book, *A Dance in the Sun*, was reviewed in our August 1956 issue.

IMMENSELY detailed, and with remarkably little overlapping, the *History* tells the story of the establishment of all the individual Jewish communities in South Africa. There are in addition chapters on South African Zionism, Jewish contributions to the economic development of the country, and the formation of the Board of Deputies as the representative body of South African Jewry. (Significantly, perhaps, there is no chapter which deals directly with religion, or any religious developments, though the establishment of each synagogue is fully recorded.) In one chapter, "From Lithuania to South Africa," Chaim Gershater describes simply how the Jews in Lithuania came to know of South Africa, how young men were sent out to establish themselves there before bringing their families over, and how the families made the long and uncomfortable journey via London to Cape Town. Another chapter, "Boers, Uitlanders, Jews," by Gustav Saron, deals with the political position of the Jews in Kruger's Transvaal Republic in the years between the discovery of the Witwatersrand goldfields and the Anglo-Boer War; the same writer contributes an "Epilogue" summarizing developments from 1910 to the present day to which readers who seek information about the community as it is now can be confidently referred.

The role of Jews in the development of diamond and gold mining, on which the South African economy still leans so heavily, was a prominent one, but many of these Jewish mining magnates were of German and English origin, and few of them, comparatively, were Litvaks. If the community today is dominated by Litvaks and their descendants, their success story is not one of wealth acquired dramatically out of gold and diamonds. The typical pattern of the careers of the Jewish immigrants from Lithuania emerges not only from the chapter in the *History* actually devoted to the Jewish contributions to the country's economic development, but from all those scattered chapters in the book which describe the establishment of isolated

communities all over the country, mentioning in every province names of distant villages from many of which the Jewish communities today have all but disappeared. Cape Town and Johannesburg and the other larger urban centers always attracted most of the immigrants, but there was hardly a *dorp* in the country where at least one Jewish storekeeper could not be found. He was usually preceded by the Jewish peddler, or *smous*, who went from farm to farm on horseback or by cart, and often the *smous* became the storekeeper, just as today the same man or his son might be the owner of a large store in a town, an industrialist, or a wholesaler. The retail trade in the country districts, which was once overwhelmingly Jewish, is no longer so: with the money they made in the country, the Jews have tended to go into the towns, the children often setting the pace of this movement, and their parents selling out to follow them.

South Africa today is not nearly as dependent on the mines as it once was. If an economic revolution occurred when diamonds were discovered in Kimberley in 1870 and gold on the Rand some ten years later, another has taken place in the years just before, during, and after World War II. The major source of the nation's wealth is today what in South Africa is called "secondary" industry—manufacturing. In "secondary" industry the Litvaks have played a part as great as that once played by the German and English Jews in the development of the mines. There is hardly a branch of manufacturing in which Jews are not prominent, and in some, such as garment making, flour-milling, furniture-making, and others, they are dominant. The Jews in South Africa have pioneered and taken risks. Though comparatively few Jews have gone into agriculture, the *History* shows that the development of the production of wool, cotton, sugar, and citrus fruits owes much to individual Jews, who in some cases were the first to experiment with these crops. And the biggest individual producers of two of South Africa's most

important crops, maize and potatoes, have both been Jews.

THE sons and daughters of these country shopkeepers, farmers, and factory-owners, with the wealth of their parents behind them, have been able to go to the universities, where they have entered the professions in very considerable numbers. Medicine and law remain the first choice of most of them, and it is they who have given the universities of the Witwatersrand and Cape Town the reputation of being largely "Jewish" institutions, though some years ago, when a census was taken at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, Jewish students turned out to be no more than about 20 per cent. (As these universities are the only two in the country which have no color bar, their supposedly "Jewish" character has a connection with some of the political issues discussed below.) But considering that the percentage of Jews in the total white population of South Africa is only about 4.4, 20 per cent is a noticeably high figure. And, of course, many Jewish students attend the country's other universities.

Naturally, perhaps, a snobbery against business has developed among these first- and second-generation Jews who take to the professions, but in this they merely follow the direction indicated by their parents, who seemed to believe that, while standing behind a counter was good enough for themselves, it would not be nearly good enough for their taller, stronger, rugby-playing South African sons.

To the intellectual and artistic life of the country, Jews have likewise contributed more than their numbers have warranted. South African intellectual life is not exactly flourishing, for the country is new, empty, devoid of institutions ("No Epsom, nor Ascot!" Henry James complained of America—one can wonder what he would have made of South Africa), racked with dissensions, and faced with problems of "cultural pluralism" which threaten to break the back of even that accommodating

little phrase. But what there is in South Africa—whether in music, painting, sculpture, or literature—owes much to individual Jews both for their contributions and their patronage. The contributions are more "South African" than "Jewish"—that is, they are made to the general culture of South Africa rather than involving specifically Jewish themes in a South African setting. The *History* has a chapter devoted to the work in Hebrew and Yiddish of the late Chief Rabbi J. H. Landau; only the most modest claims are made for any other South African works in these languages, though the flourishing Jewish press in English and the now somewhat less flourishing Yiddish press are referred to.

THE *History* finds the organization of the South African community a matter for congratulation too. It is, in the main, divided between two bodies, the South African Zionist Federation and the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, the respective functions of which are indicated by their titles. It is a measure of the enthusiasm of South African Jewry for the Zionist cause that it had a single body uniting its various Zionist groups some years before a similar body devoted to local affairs could be formed. In the early years there was, as the *History* admits, a certain amount of dissension between the Federation and the Board of Deputies, but today they work amicably together, each supported in its own field by the great majority of South African Jews.

The claim made in the *History* that the Zionist movement has had greater support from the South African Jewish community than from any other in the world is strikingly borne out by the fact that per head of population the community gives more money than any other to the various appeals for Israel; it should be mentioned, too, that in proportion to their numbers more young Jews went from South Africa than from any other country to fight in Palestine during the War of Liberation. The large sums of money given to Israel

are, of course, a reflection of the community's wealth, too, but the strength of Zionist sentiment is certainly due in part to the Litvak heritage. And there are a number of purely South African factors involved as well, among them being the past anti-Semitism of some of the country's political parties, and the general atmosphere of the country, which is one of competing nationalisms. In becoming Jewish nationalists the Jews did no more than follow the example of their neighbors.

The Zionist movement in South Africa, as elsewhere, is still in the crisis of its success. As much money as before is being given, but the number of young Jews from South Africa settling in Israel seems to grow smaller and smaller every year. Certainly the Zionist fervor of ten years ago seems to have been dissipated to some extent at least. This is not, as I have said, purely a South African problem; and in comparison with others, the South African community retains the distinction claimed for it by the editors of the *History*.

SOUTH Africa has about two and a half million whites, about ten million Natives, a large mulatto community of about a million, and about half a million Indians. The whites are divided into English- and Afrikaans-speaking inhabitants, the latter descended from the original Dutch-speaking colonists, or Boers, who established in the 19th century the two Boer republics that were later conquered by the British. The Anglo-Boer War is the least forgotten of wars in South Africa today, and there is considerable bitterness between English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking whites, which finds expression, among other things, in the two main political parties, the ruling Afrikaner Nationalist party and the opposition United Party, which is predominantly English-supported. The disputes over such things as flags, anthems, language rights, etc., etc., are endless, and can be expected to grow fiercer as the Afrikaner Nationalists press harder and harder towards their ultimate goal of

a republic outside the British Commonwealth.

This division between the two sections of the white community, though serious enough, is dwarfed by the problem of the relations between white and black. Political and economic power is in the hands of the whites, and but for a tiny group of liberals there are none among them prepared even to consider sharing their power and wealth with the blacks, or yielding any of the privileges and comforts which their status as a master race has brought them. As the blacks get more and more drawn into what is becoming a highly industrialized country, they grow increasingly restive under their helot status. Though the record of successive South African governments is not so very much worse than that of the other European powers in the continent, the outlook in South Africa—because of its relatively advanced development—is particularly foreboding. South Africa is a country of great physical beauty and almost limitless economic possibilities, but its moral atmosphere is pernicious, and there is no conscious person in the country, not even among supporters of the present government, who looks to the future with any confidence at all. But those on either side, or outside, who expect a revolution to break out at any time are invariably disappointed: the struggle for power between white and black is unlikely to be dramatic, single, settled in a matter of months, or even in a couple of years. Barring foreign intervention of a sort that it is difficult to envisage, it is likely to go on indefinitely in our lifetime or beyond it, and the prospects are that it will be nothing but ugly, intermittently bloody, and unceasingly degrading to both sides.

In a country where group animosities are so fierce, and where the political passions are so largely racial passions, the position of the Jewish community could not but be an exposed one. The *History* plays safe and does not deal at all with general political and social developments in the country except when "issues directly

affecting Jews as a group came into the political arena." With these issues the book does deal adequately, but by and large it reflects the traditional attitude of the representative bodies of South African Jewry, who have always strenuously maintained, in words similar to those chosen by the editors of the present book (which is not, incidentally, an official publication), that "Jews as a group, as opposed to individual Jews, have played no part in politics," and that "whatever political causes individual Jews espoused they acted as individuals . . . and not as representatives of the Jewish group."

IN OUR time the most significant of these issues "affecting Jews as a group" is undoubtedly the fact that before and during World War II the Afrikaner Nationalist movement became deeply imbued with anti-Semitism of a sort that owed something in inspiration to Hitler Germany, and that found a ready response in the country's particular susceptibility to racial hostilities of any kind. The Afrikaner Nationalist movement was anti-British and anti-Native and anti-Indian as well as anti-Jewish, but of the white sections of the population it was undoubtedly the Jewish community which felt the greatest alarm when in 1948 the Nationalist party defeated the Smuts government at the polls and formed a government under Malan. The alarm has by now subsided, for since coming into power, despite an occasional grumble from some of the party's wilder men, no government could have been more scrupulously correct in its attitude towards the Jewish community. Malan's government and its successor under Strijdom have continued the tradition of friendship toward the State of Israel initiated by General Smuts. Malan was the first prime minister of any country to pay the new state a visit.

One can only guess at the reasons for this change of attitude towards Jews on the part of the Nationalists, but among them no doubt is the founding of the State of Israel (for whose achievements there is

much admiration among Afrikaans-speaking South Africans), the extremely damaging effect an attack on the Jews would have on the country's economy, and—perhaps most important of all—the fact that the government has its hands quite full already without adding to its problems by creating a Jewish one. The South African government is desperately anxious to get all the support it can for its Native policies from all whites, and though its goal remains an Afrikaner republic outside the Commonwealth, it has dropped not only its anti-Jewish policies but its threats against the language rights of the English-speaking community as well.

But the relations between the Jewish community and the Afrikaner Nationalist movement remain a matter of some delicacy, for the Nationalists are now complaining of the sluggishness of the Jewish response to the new face the movement has presented to them. The Jews are tending to cling to their traditional alignment with the urban, English-speaking community; they remain suspicious of a party that only a few years ago was promising to impose political and social disabilities on certain *volksvreemde elemente* (groups alien to the *volk*). Yet given time, given no change of policy, and given the continued success of the Nationalist party, there is no doubt that sections of the Jewish community will tend more and more, as some have already done, to identify themselves with the Afrikaans-speaking group, and with the party that represents it. (The facts of demography, together with the hold that the Nationalist party has over the Afrikaans schools, youth movements, churches, and cultural movements, just about insure its continued success.)

The Jewish community does not oppose the present government because of any detestation of its Native policies, which have won it so much notoriety abroad. This fact would probably come as a surprise to some of the government's supporters, who have had drummed into them over many years the old anti-Semitic identification of Jews with Communism, and who are aware

of the prominence of some Jews in what left-wing political movements there are in South Africa. But, as a whole, Jews in South Africa have shown themselves to be no more immune from race prejudice than any other group. "*Die schwarze*" are talked of as contemptuously at Jewish tea parties as they are at gatherings of English- and Afrikaans-speaking whites; and though Jews have a reputation among the Natives for being "good" to their servants (at least so I have been told by Native servants—due allowance being made for the desire to say something pleasing), a man who is kind to his servant will not necessarily be willing to have someone with the same skin color as his servant sit in his lounge. The degree to which Jewish radicals or even more moderate "liberals" in South Africa are representative of the Jewish community is certainly very much less than their opponents suppose.

THIS may, perhaps, come as a surprise to readers outside South Africa, too, who may feel that Jews have a duty to oppose racialism because they are Jews, whether it is directed against Jews or against others. This feeling, as I have frequently met it since coming to England, is usually expressed either as a warning or as a moral exhortation. The warning is made on the grounds that a racist government must sooner or later turn against the Jews—but to this South African Jews can reply that racialism in South Africa is not a government, not a movement, not a political party, but the very basis of society: South Africa has never been anything but racist, and yet so far it is a country in which Jews have managed to fare rather well. Many South African Jews see no necessity that South African color-consciousness must give rise to anti-Semitism: if there is, it is a necessity that after three hundred years in which to mature has not yet issued into action. These people admit that their position is exposed, but, they might ask, whose position in South Africa is not? And even if theirs is more exposed than that

of any of the other white groups, is there a community in the world outside Israel about which, relative to the general degree of stability within each state, something of the same sort might not be said?

Where a warning fails, a moral exhortation is even less likely to succeed; and the present writer must admit that his sympathies are with South African Jews when their irritation is aroused by people who tell them that because they are Jews it is their duty to "throw in their lot" with the Natives, and to "stand by the victims of oppression," and the various other things that outsiders so readily advise them to do. Such things are always easy to say: those who have actually been faced with the catastrophic breakdown in communication between white and black cannot avoid asking such discomfiting questions as "How does one 'throw in one's lot' with the Natives? With which Natives does one 'throw in one's lot'? How does one convince the Natives that one has 'thrown in one's lot' with them?" And to point out to the moralists that what is being asked of one is very possibly the disruption of one's private life, isolation from the only community one knows, and even a readiness to go to jail for one's views. For something which it is barely an exaggeration to describe as a martyrdom of a kind is the penalty paid by those white men who do wholeheartedly seek to better the political and social and political conditions under which the Natives live, and though there are in South Africa a few white people who do desperately try to cross the gulf between black and white, who do make these great sacrifices, such people are very rare indeed—as rare as they would be anywhere else. The idea that the entire South African Jewish community should, or could possibly, be composed of such individuals is one that it is very difficult indeed to attempt to entertain seriously.

It must be added there are in South Africa a few responsible Jewish religious and communal leaders whose concern about conditions in the country stems in

part from their interpretation of both the Jewish ethic and Jewish experience in history, and who are unafraid to express their views and to act on them. There are not many, but there are some; and of all, they are the least likely to speak wildly about the Jews throwing in their lot with the Natives in the fine and simple way that proposition seems to present itself to some people outside South Africa. I cannot believe that it is not significant that the only people actually in South Africa who do loudly and persistently call upon the Jews, because they are Jews, to "throw in their lot" with the Natives are the Communists, who, like Communists anywhere else in the world, make appeals that are permitted by contempt for the fate of particular people in particular situations to have the appearance of being totally "generous" and "idealistic"—the "generosity" and "idealism" being "total" because they have nothing to do with the human possibilities that exist in any particular situation. The rest of us—even if we are outsiders looking at South Africa—have the duty to respect the facts, not least of which is the fact of human limitation.

BY ITS nature, a book like the *History* has to take for granted the existence of the Jewish community which is its subject, and it is only in Mr. Saron's "Epilogue" that the question of the future of the community is raised, not only in relation to the other groups in South Africa but internally—in relation, as one might say, to itself. South African Jewry is facing these same problems of acculturation and assimilation that face the other Jewish communities of the Western world, but, because it has only recently become predominantly South African-born, and because of the divisive

tendencies of life at large in South Africa, the community has so far maintained a remarkable sense of solidarity and cohesiveness. Yet there is a need, as Mr. Saron puts it, "for earnest heart-searching, for re-thinking fundamentally the questions relating to the future of the Jewish community, here as elsewhere." Though some observers have seen signs of a religious revival in South Africa similar to that reported by some writers from America, there is no doubt that the traditional and religious sanctions have a much weaker hold upon South African-born Jews than they did upon their parents and grandparents. And the Zionist movement too, it has been suggested, is losing some of the immediacy of its appeal. What is to take the place of these?

It is a question that Mr. Saron does not really attempt to answer, and indeed one he could not be expected to answer. Nor would any reader feel it to have been entirely answered were mention made here of the elaborate Jewish country clubs on whose growth in the past decade Mr. Saron not altogether hopefully remarks; or of the wedding parties that are held in such large halls all over Johannesburg every Sunday afternoon; or of the crowds who go down every year to Muizenberg, South Africa's premier Jewish holiday resort.

The Jews in South Africa: a History is a story of adaptation and tenacity, and if the South African Jewish community has anything of the qualities of the people who founded it, with its present wealth, self-respect, and organizational strength, it should—at least as much as any other white group in the country—be able to continue with its task of developing satisfactory and characteristic forms of expression out of those it already has.